

THE PERCEPTION OF ENGLISH-ACCENTED POLISH – A PILOT STUDY

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Abstract

While the perception of Polish-accented English by native-speakers has been studied extensively (e.g. Gonet & Pietroń 2004, Scheuer 2003, Szpyra-Kozłowska 2005, in press), an opposite phenomenon, i.e. the perception of English-accented Polish by Poles has not, to our knowledge, been examined so far despite a growing number of Polish-speaking foreigners, including various celebrities, who appear in the Polish media and whose accents are often commented on and even parodied.

In this paper we offer a report on a pilot study in which 60 Polish teenagers, all secondary school learners (aged 15-16) listened to and assessed several samples of foreign-accented Polish in a series of scalar judgement and open question tasks meant to examine Poles' attitudes to English accent(s) in their native language.

More specifically, we aimed at finding answers to the following research questions:

- How accurately can Polish listeners identify foreign accents in Polish?
- How is English-accented Polish, when compared to Polish spoken with a Russian, Spanish, French, Italian, German and Chinese accent, evaluated by Polish listeners in terms of the samples' degree of:
 - (a) comprehensibility
 - (b) foreign accentedness
 - (c) pleasantness?
- What phonetic and phonological features, both segmental and prosodic, are perceived by Polish listeners as characteristic of English-accented Polish?
- Can Polish listeners identify different English accents (American, English and Scottish) in English-accented Polish?
- Does familiarity with a specific foreign language facilitate the recognition and identification of that accent in foreign-accented Polish?

1. Introduction

While the perception of Polish-accented English by native-speakers has been studied extensively (e.g. Gonet & Pietroń 2004, Scheuer 2003, Szpyra-Kozłowska 2005, in press), the perception of foreign-accented Polish by Poles has not, to our knowledge, been examined so far despite a growing number of Polish-speaking foreigners, including various celebrities, who appear in the Polish media and whose accents are often commented on and even parodied. They include, for example, an American model of Polish descent, an Italian dancer, a German actor and comedian, a French chef with Polish roots. Apart from such celebrities, more and more foreigners undertake to learn

Polish: students who study in Poland, businessmen representing their firms, citizens of the former Soviet republics (mostly Ukrainians and Byelorussians) seeking employment in this country and many others. In recent years Polish has, in fact, become a popular language to learn, as shown in the growing number of Polish language schools that have opened in the major Polish cities, such as Warsaw and Cracow.¹ These facts allow us to claim that Poles have found themselves in a fairly new situation of being increasingly exposed to many different versions of foreign-accented Polish. It is therefore interesting to examine how such accents are perceived and evaluated by Polish listeners.

In this paper we offer a report on a study in which 60 Polish teenagers listened to and assessed several samples of foreign-accented Polish in a series of scalar judgement and open question tasks meant to examine Poles' perception of several foreign accents in their native language, including three English accents.

More specifically, we aimed at finding answers to the following research questions:

- How accurately can Polish listeners identify foreign accents in Polish?
- How is English-accented Polish, when compared to Polish spoken with a Russian, Spanish, French, Italian, German and Chinese accent, evaluated by Polish listeners in terms of the samples' degree of:
 - (d) comprehensibility
 - (e) foreign accentedness
 - (f) pleasantness (acceptability)?
- What phonetic and phonological features, both segmental and prosodic, are perceived by Polish listeners as characteristic of English-accented Polish?
- Can Polish listeners identify different English accents (American, English, English and Scottish) in English-accented Polish?
- Does familiarity with a specific foreign language facilitate the recognition and identification of that accent in foreign-accented Polish?

It should be pointed out that as the present study is limited in terms of the number and quality of the analysed accent samples as well as in employing only one group of assessors, its results should be regarded as preliminary and subject to future verification.²

2. Experimental design

In this section we present the relevant details concerning the design of the experiment we have carried out in order to examine the perception of English-accented Polish. We deal here first with the samples of Polish subject to evaluation and then with the listening and assessment procedure.

¹ It is worth pointing out that many citizens of the British Isles undertake to learn Polish because their jobs require contacts with Polish immigrants.

² After the completion of this paper another experiment of a similar design was carried out by the authors in which the same speech samples were evaluated by different participants, i.e. 60 Polish Department students (aged 20-24) of Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin. The results obtained in both groups are very similar and support the majority of the conclusions drawn in this paper. A fuller discussion of the latter experiment can be found in Szpyra-Kozłowska and Radomski (in press).

2.1. Samples of foreign-accented Polish

For the purposes of the experiment between July and November 2011, 20 foreign speakers of Polish were recorded while performing two tasks: reading a short passage taken from a coursebook in Polish for the beginners³ and talking with one of the experimenters on some everyday topics. 9 samples were then selected for accent evaluation. The speakers (5 men and 4 women) were citizens of the USA, Scotland, England, Russia, Germany, Italy, France, Spain and China (speaker of Mandarin), all staying temporarily in Poland and learning Polish for a variety of personal and professional reasons and for different periods of time (ranging from several weeks up to three years). Care was taken to select speech samples with a similar, i.e. average degree of foreign-accentedness, that is those ones in which a foreign accent was noticeable or even strong, but which generally did not hinder the intelligibility of utterances.⁴ Only samples of reading were used in the experiment since they were more uniform with respect to their degree of accentedness than the recordings of spoken Polish in which numerous grammatical errors made them often incomprehensible. Moreover, as the focus of this study was on pronunciation problems, grammatically correct written passages were more appropriate for diagnostic purposes.⁵ Each recording was between 1,5 and 2 minutes long.

2.2. Listeners

Nine samples of foreign-accented Polish were presented to a group of 60 Polish boys and girls, aged 15-16, all attending a junior secondary school (*gymnasium*) in Lublin, where one of the experimenters was an English teacher. All the participants had been learning English for about 5-6 years and, apart from it, also another language, i.e. German, Spanish, Russian or French. These facts indicate that all of them have acquaintance with English pronunciation (usually in its RP version), but are also familiar with the sounds of some other languages, which should facilitate accent assessment.

2.3. Listening and assessment procedure

In November 2011, the participants were informed that they would listen to the recordings of several speech samples of Polish provided by foreign learners of this language and then would be asked to assess them by completing the prepared answer sheets. They did it in two sessions (5 samples were evaluated in the first session and 4 samples in the second one), with a one-week interval between them, during their regular

³ The texts used in the experiment were adapted from Swan (2005).

⁴ We were not always successful in this respect and while extreme cases of exceptionally good and very poor Polish pronunciation were rejected, the experimental samples cannot be claimed to be uniform in terms of their degree of accentedness.

⁵ It should be pointed out, however, that there are also drawbacks of employing samples of reading as many foreign speakers' pronunciation is heavily influenced by Polish spelling.

English lessons. Each sample was presented twice and then ample time was given to the students to provide answers. Whenever necessary, additional explanations were provided by the experimenter.

The answer sheets contained 3 scalar judgement tasks concerning the samples' degree of comprehensibility, foreign-accentedness and pleasantness, as well as three open questions in which the subjects were asked to identify the speakers' country of origin, to list their most striking pronunciation features and to describe a given accent in impressionistic terms. Finally, the students supplied information on their age, sex and foreign languages they learnt. Needless to say, the study was anonymous.

3. Results and discussion

The presentation and discussion of the results given below will follow the research questions provided in section 1.

3.1. Foreign accent recognition

In the first question of our study we asked the participants to identify the country of the speakers' origin. They succeeded in completing this task in 37.5% of cases.⁶

Below we present the percentage of the correct answers dividing the nine accents into three groups: those which were (relatively) easy to recognize (above 50% of the correct responses), those which were difficult to identify (20% of correct responses and less) and those which were of medium difficulty (between 20% and 50%).

Accents which were easy to identify (over 50%):

Russian – 86%

Chinese – 56%

American English – 36% (83%)

Thus, the absolute winner was a Russian accent in Polish, or, to generalize, the east Slavic accents, including also Ukrainian and Byelorussian.⁷ This result can be attributed not only to very distinct features of this accent, but also to its considerable familiarity to Polish listeners who are often exposed to it in the media, for example in the news reports of Polish-speaking reporters from Kiev or Vilnius, and who can also hear it from (mostly) Ukrainian citizens, particularly numerous in the Lublin region, situated in the east of Poland, close to the Ukrainian border.

The second accent, recognized by 56% of participants, was Chinese, which is surprising for two reasons. First, the recorded Chinese woman speaks beautiful, fully intelligible Polish, with only a few phonetic departures from the original. Secondly,

⁶ In our experiment the identification task was very difficult as the choice was not limited as is frequently the case in other accent studies, where the participants have to choose from several provided options, as in Flege and Fletcher (1992) or Mareuil, Brahimi and Gendrot (2010).

⁷ In fact, these three accents are very similar and cannot be easily told apart.

Polish learners are not often exposed to this accent. Yet, its phonetic properties were distinct enough to lead to this high result.⁸

Finally, an American English accent in Polish was placed in this group although only 36% of the answers were fully correct. It must be added, however, that 47% participants identified it as 'some kind of English.' This yields 83% of the responses recognizing this accent as produced by a native-speaker of English. As a matter of fact, the American English accent in Polish turned out to be the most English-sounding accent of the three varieties subject to analysis. An explanation of this fact should be sought in the participants' frequent exposure to American English, mainly through films and songs.

Accents which were of medium difficulty to identify (20%-50%)

German – 36%

Only one accent, i.e. German, appeared to be of medium difficulty to identify and was recognized correctly by 36% of the participants only. Two comments are in order. First, this fairly low result might follow from the young age of the subjects. In the case of older Poles the success of identifying this accent might be greater due to massive exposure of the oldest generation to German during World War II, numerous war films popular in Poland until the 80's and a considerably larger number of German learners in Poland in the past than now. Secondly, the pupils who took part in the experiment live in eastern Poland, with relatively few German visitors. It would therefore be interesting to find out whether similar results would be obtained in western regions where the ties with Germany are much stronger.

Accents which were difficult to identify (20% and below):

Italian – 21%

French – 15%

English English – 3,3%

Scottish English – 1,6%

Spanish – 0%

As many as five accents out of nine are placed in the third group as those ones which were particularly difficult to recognize for the listeners. Within this set, the Italian and the French samples were identified correctly by considerably more participants than the remaining three accents, which include English English, Scottish English and Spanish (below 4% of the correct responses). Quite surprisingly, both the English English and Scottish English samples belong here in spite of the fact that all the participants are learners of English and should thus be familiar with typical phonetic properties of this language and at least with those features which are common to the majority of its varieties. Spanish-accented Polish has to be singled out as the accent which failed to be recognized completely, with no correct responses at all (0%).

To sum up this part of our experiment, of the three English accents presented to the listeners, only Polish with American English features was relatively easy to recognize.

A question that arises in connection with the data above is whether accent recognition depends on the degree of the samples' accentedness, as it might be assumed that the more accented someone's speech is, the easier it is to identify the speaker's

⁸ It should be added here that we counted as correct those answers according to which the accent under discussion was described as Japanese as in common, though completely incorrect view prevalent in Poland, Chinese and Japanese are regarded as similar languages.

origin. In other words, if more phonetic clues are available to the listener, this should facilitate accent recognition. A comparison of the results provided in this section with those concerning accentedness in section 3.3. shows, however, that this connection is only partial. Thus, while the American and Russian samples were regarded as both strongly accented and easy to identify, the English English recording was considered strongly accented but difficult to recognize. Moreover, the German speaker had, according to the participants, the strongest foreign accent of all, yet its correct identifications amounted to 36% only. On the other hand, there is a high correlation between the samples' low level of accentedness and a small degree of their recognition since the Spanish, French, Italian and Scottish English recordings are found in this category. To sum up, while 'the weaker the accent, the more difficult it is to identify' principle appears to hold true, its opposite does not.

To shed more light on accent perception, it seems also interesting to examine the erroneous judgements in some detail. Below we present the number of countries indicated as the place of the speakers' origin:

German – 26	American English – 11
Scottish English – 24	French – 11
English English – 19	Italian – 11
Spanish – 13	Russian – 4
Chinese – 12	

Thus, the German-accented and Russian-accented samples are two extremes in this evaluation as in the former case as many as 26 different countries were listed (including such unlikely candidates as Korea, Japan, Canada, Jamaica and Hungary) and in the latter only 4. Polish pronounced with a Scottish-English accent and with an English-English accent also caused considerable differences of opinion while the nationality of the American English speaker was less controversial.

It should also be pointed out that some interesting patterns can be observed in the incorrect evaluations of English-accented Polish. Thus, to 26% of the participants the Scottish sample sounded German and to 23% Czech or Slovak, whereas the English English sample was considered to be uttered by a German speaker by 20% of the subjects and 18% of them viewed it as produced by someone from Africa.⁹ This means that while the recognition of these accents is extremely poor, their Germanic nature is identified by about one fourth of the listeners.

3.2. Accent recognition versus language learning

Another research question concerned the relation between accent recognition and familiarity with the specific foreign languages. According to the experimental data, this correlation is either very weak or nonexistent.

Thus, while all the participants are learners of English, only about 30% of them recognized the three samples produced by English speakers as uttered by a person from

⁹ It is interesting to note that in the case of such judgements the name of the whole continent was provided and not of individual countries. This means that Polish participants either assume that there is something like one African accent or simply cannot tell these accents apart.

an English-speaking country. Similarly, of 37 learners of German, only 13 identified this accent correctly. What is more, none of the 10 learners of Spanish provided the correct answer and the French accent was properly recognized only by nine pupils who had never learnt this language.

Only in the case of Russian-accented Polish were these two factors correlated in that all 10 learners of Russian identified the accent correctly, but since a similar decision was made by numerous other participants who do not know this language, this fact can be viewed as accidental.

We feel therefore justified in concluding that exposure to foreign accents and their characteristic phonetic properties play a greater role in accent identification than foreign language learning.

3.3. Evaluation of samples' comprehensibility, foreign-accentedness and pleasantness

Three experimental tasks involved making scalar judgements by the listeners in order to assess the samples degree of comprehensibility, foreign-accentedness and pleasantness.

In the first of them the participants were requested to indicate how difficult it was to understand a given sample by choosing one of five options ranging from 'very easy to understand' to 'incomprehensible.' The results fall roughly into two types: the samples considered either very difficult or completely incomprehensible by over 45% of the listeners and those ones which were viewed as either very easy or rather easy to understand by over 50% of the subjects. The first category comprises the following:

Accents which were very difficult to understand / incomprehensible

German - - 96%	English English – 45%
American English – 55%	Scottish English – 46%
Russian – 50%	

As shown above, the German-accented sample was rated as the most incomprehensible by as many as 96% of the respondents as it was indeed the most heavily accented recording. It is striking that all three English-accented samples were also placed in this group in spite of the fact that all the participants learn English, which should facilitate comprehension.

Let us examine now the second group of samples.

Accents which were very easy / rather easy to understand

Chinese – 76%	Spanish – 58%
Italian – 76%	Scottish English – 53%
French – 71%	Russian – 50%

The Chinese, Italian and the French samples were absolute winners in this category. The Scottish English speaker was judged by 53% of the subjects as rather easy to understand.

Two contradictory evaluations should be pointed out concerning the Russian and Scottish recordings which found themselves in both categories. Thus, a similar number of the subjects maintained that they were easy / rather easy to understand and that they were difficult to comprehend.

The next task required specifying the degree of samples' foreign-accentedness. The participants were provided with five options (from 'slight' to 'very strong foreign accent'). The results are presented below.

Strong / very strong foreign accent:

German – 85%	English English – 76%
American English – 85%	Chinese – 40%
Russian – 83%	Scottish English – 33%

According to the above figures, the American English and English English samples were regarded as strongly accented by 85% and 76% of the listeners respectively. The judgements were less severe in the case of the Scottish English recording, which was considered strongly accented by 33% of the subjects.

The remaining samples were perceived as pronounced with a very slight or slight foreign accent.

Very slight / slight foreign accent

Spanish – 26%	Italian – 20%
French – 25%	Scottish English – 18%

Again, we should note the occurrence of the Scottish recording in both categories, which shows that this particular sample was difficult for the listeners to evaluate.

The third task consisted in deciding how pleasant / unpleasant sounding a given accent was. As in the previous cases, five options were supplied to choose from. The relevant figures are given below.

Rather unpleasant / very unpleasant accents:

German – 71%	American English – 50%
Russian – 63%	English English – 50%

Both American English and English English accents in Polish were placed in this group with about half of the subjects regarding them as either rather unpleasant or very unpleasant. It is worth pointing out that, apart from Russian, the remaining samples represent Germanic languages, commonly perceived by Poles as harsh sounding.

The most pleasant accents included the following:

Very pleasant / pleasant accents:

French – 55%
Italian – 48%
Spanish – 33%

It is striking that all the three samples found in the category of pleasant sounding accents were provided by speakers of Romance languages, in common Polish opinion regarded as nice and melodious.

The greatest differences of opinion were observed in the case of two accents, i.e. Chinese and Scottish English, with a similar number of respondents judging them as pleasant and unpleasant:

	<u>Pleasant</u>	<u>unpleasant</u>
Chinese	30%	35%
Scottish English	27%	30%

As in the remaining instances, the Scottish recording appears to stand apart from the other ones in triggering contradictory judgements of the listeners.

A closer examination of the above data shows that there is a large degree of correlation between the three aspects of accent perception analysed in this section. Thus,

the French, Italian and Spanish samples were judged easy to understand, only slightly foreign-accented and pleasant sounding. On the other hand, German, Russian, American English and English English samples were assessed as difficult to understand, heavily accented and unpleasant sounding. Only in the case of the Chinese and Scottish English samples were the judgements less uniform; both were perceived as strongly accented but easy to understand and this discrepancy may be the reason why they were evaluated in two extreme ways in terms of their pleasantness.

To sum up, of the three English accents in Polish, the Scottish English recording was more highly evaluated by Polish listeners than the American English and English English samples in terms of its comprehensibility and aesthetic qualities.

The mean results concerning the comprehensibility, accentedness and pleasantness of the experimental samples are presented in the table below. A five point scale (1-5) was used, where the higher the figure, the more severe the participants' judgements.¹⁰

Speakers' native language	comprehensibility	accentedness	pleasantness
German	4.67	4.39	4.03
Russian	3.43	4.04	3.66
English English	3.32	4.06	3.62
American English	2.88	4.19	3.55
Scottish English	2.46	3.1	3.05
Spanish	2.32	2.73	2.85
Chinese	2.20	3.11	3.03
Italian	2.20	2.79	2.70
French	2.15	3.04	2.57

Table 1. Mean evaluations of the samples' comprehensibility, accentedness and pleasantness

The data in Table 1 confirm our earlier observations concerning a high degree of correlation between the listeners' evaluations of the samples' comprehensibility, accentedness and pleasantness. This is in agreement with the findings of previous research (e.g. Fayer and Krasinski 1987, Munro and Derwing 1995) which indicate that a lower degree of foreign accent is associated with higher intelligibility and lower irritation.¹¹

¹⁰ It should be pointed out that there are some differences between the results presented earlier and those in Table 1 due to the already discussed contradictory evaluations of some samples which influence the mean values in the table.

¹¹ It should be added that in accent evaluations various extralinguistic factors, such as, for example, the listeners' attitude towards various ethnic groups, often play an important role. We address this issue in another experimental study which is now in preparation.

3.4. Perceived phonetic properties of English-accented Polish

The respondents were also requested to enumerate those phonetic properties of the presented foreign accents which they found particularly striking. They did it either by listing some words found in the samples and underlining their mispronounced portions or by making explicit comments on the specific aspects of the speakers' pronunciation, such as, for example, *'he pronounces 'r' in a strange way'* or *'she puts too much emphasis on 'p' and 'k'.*

All the participants were unanimous in pointing out the most noticeable features of all the accents occurring in our experiment. The first of them concerns the pronunciation of Polish coronals, i.e. the 'soft' realization of the postalveolar obstruents as palatoalveolars. The second problem involves prepalatals, usually pronounced by foreign learners also as palatoalveolars.¹² In other words, Polish listeners often observed in the experimental samples the lack of distinction between postalveolars and prepalatals, rarely found in other languages.

The next common difficulty concerns consonant clusters which abound in Polish in all positions, but are infrequent in other languages. In the case of the English-accented samples the following word-initial clusters were often underlined as pronounced incorrectly¹³: *szczupła* /ʃtʂupwa/ 'slim,' *wcześnie* /ftʂɛɲe/ 'early,' *przygotowuje* /pʂɨgotovuje/ 'prepares,' *zdolny* /zdolnɨ/ 'talented,' *wstawać* /vstavatɕ/ 'get up,' *śniadanie* /ʂnadane/, etc.

The respondents noted also some characteristic vowel features, i.e. frequent replacements of the high front centralized vowel, spelt as <y> with its fully front counterpart [i], e.g. *Krystyna* > [Kristina] 'Christine', *medycyna* > [medicina] 'medical science,' as well as problems with the correct pronunciation of the so-called nasal vowels, spelt as <ą> and <ę>, which are realized in several ways depending on the context.¹⁴

Three additional features frequently appeared in the assessment of the English-accented samples. Many respondents noted aspiration of voiceless plosives claiming that the speakers put too much emphasis or stress on /p/ and /k/, *'spit them out'* or simply *'pronounced them in a funny way.'* Also the English rhotics in all three accents attracted much attention with such comments as *'she pronounces /r/ differently than we do'* (about the American speaker), *'he swallows many r's'* (about the English English speaker) and *'his /r/ is blurred / unclear'* (about the Scottish English speaker). Finally, some listeners observed what they considered an unusual pronunciation of stressed and unstressed vowels; the former were often lengthened, the latter reduced, as in *do domu* 'home' pronounced as [dɔdɔ:mu] and *kupili* 'they bought' rendered as [kə'pʰili].

¹² Other realizations of prepalatals, for example, as palatalized dentals / alveolars, were also attested.

¹³ The incorrect versions contained either modifications of one or two consonants in a cluster, a deletion of a segment or vowel insertion.

¹⁴ A more detailed description of the perceived phonetic properties of foreign-accented Polish can be found in Szpyra-Kozłowska and Radomski (in press).

Thus, in their evaluations of English-accented Polish, the listeners paid attention almost exclusively to segmental features, particularly those pertaining to consonants and consonant clusters. Prosodic aspects of the experimental samples failed to be noticed by almost all the participants, which contradicts those views (e.g. Jilka 2011) according to which suprasegmental factors, and intonation in particular, are of primary importance in the perception of foreign accent.

3.5. Impressionistic evaluation

In the final task the respondents were asked to provide their own descriptions of the experimental samples' accents which were, obviously, impressionistic in character. The most striking observation we have made concerns a large number of negative terms in comparison with positive evaluations.

Thus, the adjectives that were found in virtually all answer sheets were '*dziwny*' and '*śmieszny*', both of which are ambiguous in Polish as they are in English; the former means both 'strange' and 'difficult to accept, weird,' the latter both 'amusing' and 'ridiculous.' Other frequently used terms include *irytujący* 'irritating,' *denerwujący* 'annoying,' *żałosny* 'pathetic,' *okropny* 'terrible,' *sepleniący* 'lispings,' *nieporadny* 'clumsy,' *niewyraźny* 'unclear,' *nudny* 'boring,' *mówi jakby miał zatkaany nos* 'speaks through a stuffed nose,' *mówi jak pijany* 'sounds drunk.'

Positive and neutral terms such as *interesujący* 'interesting,' *miły* 'nice,' *delikatny* 'delicate,' *fajny* 'cool,' *miękki* 'soft,' *egzotyczny* 'exotic,' were rarely employed by the respondents.

This result of our study is further supported by the fact that in the scalar judgement task which involved describing the accents' pleasantness, two extreme options were selected with strikingly different frequency; of 540 evaluations, only in 30 cases was the 'very pleasant' label chosen, while its opposite, i.e. 'very unpleasant' over three times more often (108 times).

The accents which evoked most negative comments of the participants were German, described as *twardy* 'hard,' *szorstki* 'harsh,' *toporny* 'coarse' and *barbarzyński* 'barbaric,' but also English English and American English, perceived by many subjects as *plujący* 'spitting,' *sepleniący* 'lispings,' and *niedbały* 'careless,' *niechlujny* 'sloppy.'

The samples which received the most positive descriptions comprise Italian (*śmieszny ale fajny* 'funny but cool,' *interesujący* 'interesting'), Spanish (*egzotyczny* 'exotic,' *ciekawny* 'interesting') and Chinese (*delikatny* 'delicate').

The above facts point to a fairly critical attitude of the participants towards foreign-accented Polish who seem to fail to appreciate the amount of effort required in learning a difficult language like Polish and who are rather harsh in their judgements. This might stem from the fact of their insufficient exposure to foreign versions of Polish and the resulting lack of tolerance towards something that is little known and should therefore be approached with caution. The teenagers' predominantly negative perception of foreign-accented Polish may also be attributed to a tendency typical of that particular age group to express highly critical and frequently extreme and unbalanced opinions. Whether this

intolerance of foreign accents in Polish speech is a more general issue remains to be investigated in the future.¹⁵

4. Conclusions

The present pilot study on the perception of foreign-accented Polish, and Polish spoken with an English accent in particular, allows us to formulate several tentative conclusions.

1. Of the nine samples employed in our experiment, it was the easiest for the participants to recognize the Russian, American and Chinese accents. The English English and Scottish English samples were identified correctly by a few subjects only.
2. No significant correlation was found between the fact of learning a given foreign language and the ease of its recognition. Only 30% of the participants, all learners of English, were able to identify the English-accented samples as produced by a native-speaker of English.
3. The American English and English English samples were assessed as difficult to understand, heavily accented and unpleasant sounding. The Scottish English accent received more favourable opinions on all three counts.
4. While a non-Polish pronunciation of postalveolar and prepalatal consonants as well as problems with consonant clusters appear to be the most noticeable properties of all foreign accents, those produced by native-speakers of English are additionally perceived as having aspirated plosives, a nontrilled pronunciation of rhotics, as well as lengthened stressed vowels and reduced unstressed vowels.
5. The participants take a critical attitude towards foreign-accented Polish shown, among other things, in their use of many negative evaluative terms, several of which were provided in reference to the English-accented samples, with Scottish English again standing apart as perceived more positively.

As has already been pointed out, further research is needed to find out whether the above conclusions will retain their validity when more samples of foreign-accented Polish and different groups of participants are employed in the experimental procedure.

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¹⁵ The validity of this conclusion finds support in another study by Szpyra-Kozłowska and Radomski (in press) in which the same samples were evaluated by Polish Department students, aged 20-24. In this group negative comments on foreign accents were virtually absent, which can be attributed either to greater maturity of the participants or their increased self-control and political correctness. It should be added that positive remarks were also absent and in most cases blank space was left where comments were requested.

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